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Vertigo: Why paramotoring not as popular in M'sia

SINTOK: It is a widely-held belief that air sports are only for the bold and daring.

Such activities are believed to carry a higher risk of injury and death.

Moreover, those who suffer from vertigo (dizziness and a sensation of falling when at heights) tend to be even more averse to air sports.

This common perception is a possible cause for why paramotoring is not as popular in Malaysia as in western countries.

In fact, however, sufferers of vertigo can also enjoy paramotoring.

Paramotoring is one of the safest air sports. It is often confused with paragliding.

It uses the same wing (also known as canopy) as paragliding, but also relies on a 115-150cc engine to enable flight.

Paragliding, in contrast, does not require an engine. However, pilots need to takeoff from a height to enable flight.

Abu Bakar Mat Safar, a paramotor sports coach at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), said paragliding depends entirely on wind-power. Paramotoring, however, uses fuel to fly at a higher altitude, as well as wind-power.

"A paramotor consists of a frame that combines a motor, propeller and harness with an integrated seat and cage. It provides two attachment points for the risers of a paraglider wing that allows for powered flight. Paragliding, on the other hand, relies on the paraglider wing and harness," said Bakar, in a recent interview to Bernama. "Therefore, paramotoring is safer because it can be engaged in on a flat-surfaced area like an open field. In contrast, the paragliding wing only inflates after the pilot jumps," he explained.

He said that even though there was still risk involved, it could be minimised if the pilot adhered to correct techniques and procedures.

In the event of an engine failure or bad weather, a pilot can perform an emergency landing at a safe location.

Vertigo need not be an obstacle for those interested in paramotoring. It is a common sensation that can be managed.

Abu Bakar said he has had several students who were afraid of heights at the start of training, but managed to complete it.

He said he employed various techniques to rid them of their fear of heights.

This included making them scale tall buildings with ropes.

"The first time is always the hardest. Students feel dizzy and scared, but both feelings disappear with practice. After a while, they are brave and confident enough to control the wing. Then they are given a chance to fly, but without the engine," said Bakar.

"Here is when we put the students in harnesses. To enable flight, students run for a while, launching the wing with their arms. Simultaneously, we control the harness using a rope tied to it."

"We use walkie-talkies to explain to students what they need to do. They are only allowed to fly a maximum of 16.6 metre (50 feet).

"The rope tied to their harness is released after they have been in the air for several minutes. This gives them enough confidence to fly without fear," he said.

Before a pilot is allowed to fly, several factors need to be considered. These include body-weight, expertise and weather conditions. Wing, equipment and engine checks also need to be carried out.

The pilot's weight is important because he needs to carry an engine weighing between 25 and 30kg, and requires physical strength to do so. For this reason, only those weighing over 50kg are allowed to participate in this sport.

"A pilot's weight is taken seriously in paramotoring. For example, those weighing between 50 and 70kg need a wind speed of less than 10kmph to allow take off," said Bakar.

"Those weighing between 70 and 90kg need a medium-sized wing. Why? So that there is a balance between the weight of their body and the wing," he added.

In addition, a pilot also needs to know the weather forecast and wind speed before flying. The ideal wind-speed is between 10 to 15kmph. Higher speeds are unsafe for flight.

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UUM is the only learning institute that includes paramotor sports as part of its co-curricular courses.

It was introduced in 2007 but only 120 students have taken it up since. This is due to the fact that only those meeting all requirements are allowed to take up the sport.

"Students have to go through several procedures before they are allowed to begin. This includes interviews, body-weight check, fitness-test and health checkups," he said.

Wearing glasses, however, is not a hindrance to engaging in this sport.

UUM is seeking to promote the sport by offering it as a co-curricular course.

"There is still low awareness about the nature of the sport. This is why we need to promote it further. We find that people are more receptive to the idea when they see us flying at carnivals," he said.

Despite having a mishap during training, International Business Management student, Nurwani Che Rashid, also a paramotoring student, said she had no regrets.

The 22-year-old had landed on her back instead of her feet, but the accident only spurred her enthusiasm to master the sport.

Bernama



Vertigo – this common perception is a possible cause as to why paramotoring is not as popular in Malaysia as in western countries.